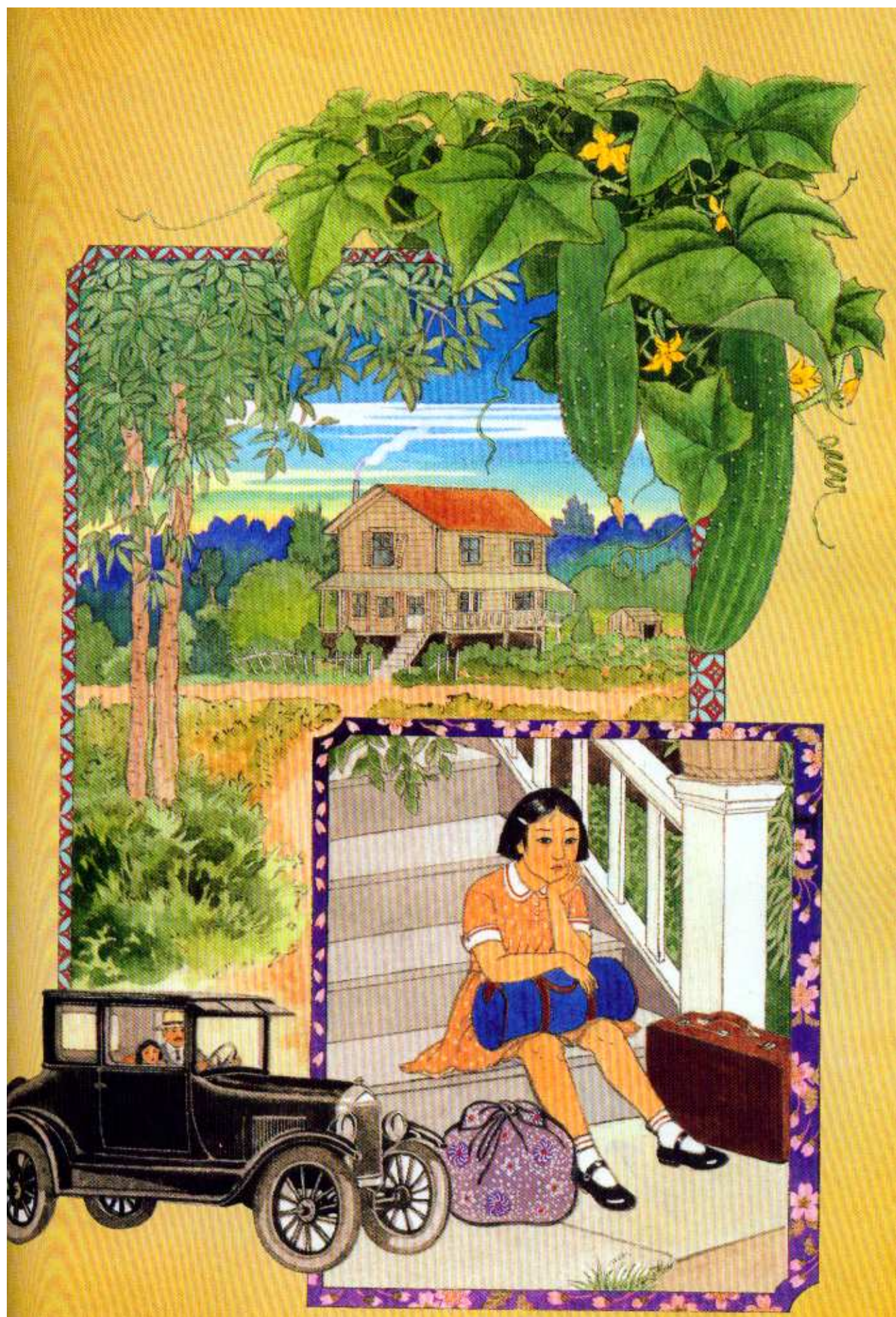


THE BEST BAD THING

by Yoshiko Uchida
illustrated by
Kinuko Y. Craft

When Rinko's mother asks her to spend the last month of her vacation helping the recently widowed Mrs. Hata, Rinko is sure that her summer will be ruined. People say that Mrs. Hata is a little eccentric, and Rinko believes them. Furthermore, Rinko has never been away from home, and she does not want to travel to East Oakland to harvest cucumbers in Mrs. Hata's fields. Rinko cannot convince her parents to let her stay home, but they do agree to let her come back after two weeks if she is still uncomfortable at Mrs. Hata's.

When she arrives in East Oakland, Rinko has to adjust to living in an old, shabby house with Mrs. Hata and her two sons, Zenny and Abu. Rinko soon makes friends with the boys, and one day they dare her to hitch a ride on one of the freight trains that run alongside the Hatas' house. Even though Mrs. Hata has forbidden them to ride the trains, Rinko and the boys do it, and Rinko badly sprains her ankle in jumping off a freight. A mysterious old man who lives near the Hatas fixes her ankle, and although her foot feels better, Rinko can't shake the feeling that more bad things will follow.



I knew turning my ankle was a bad omen. Mama always says bad things happen in threes, so I knew I probably had two more coming. Or maybe, I thought, coming to East Oakland was the first bad thing and I was already on my second one.

Sometimes when two bad things happen, Mama will purposely break something she doesn't care about and say, "There! That's the third bad thing. Now we're finished."

I wished I could get my two more bad things over with fast, but I certainly couldn't break any of Auntie Hata's dishes. She didn't have that many to spare.

What really made me feel so awful about the whole thing was that Auntie Hata didn't get mad when I told her what I'd done. What she said was, "Ah, well, Rinko, I guess you're still only a child after all."

And she put cold compresses on my ankle and kept me off my feet, which made me feel worse than if she'd gotten mad and scolded me for being so stupid. Mama might just as well have sent Joji, I thought, for all the help I was to Auntie Hata.

As soon as my ankle was better, I tried to make up for everything and be a more responsible person. I was still limping, but I could help Auntie Hata hang out her wash, which she scrubbed in a big metal tub heated on the wood stove. And I ironed her sheets and pillowcases so she'd have nice smooth sheets to sleep on. I

could see why she usually didn't bother and why her clothes looked wrinkled. Ironing wasn't easy when you had to heat a big heavy iron on the wood stove.

I also swept out the whole house, which wasn't hard since there were no rugs, and I used damp tea leaves to keep down the dust. It didn't matter what day I cleaned, because Auntie Hata didn't have a special day for it like Mama, who wants it done on Saturdays.



Auntie Hata seemed to do things when the spirit moved her, and that was fine with me.

One morning I got up even before the first train to help with breakfast. Actually, what I wanted to do was ask Auntie Hata about the old man before Zenny and Abu came down.

I saw she already had a pot of rice bubbling on the stove and was poking at the fire, talking to it so it would burn brighter.

"Shall I help make the soup?" I asked.

"That would be nice," Auntie Hata said into the fire. "I'll go out and get some fresh cucumbers."

And before I could even say, "old man," she was out the back door and gone.

The next thing I knew, she was calling to me.

"Rinko, Rinko! Hurry! Come quick!"

I was sure something awful had happened, like maybe she'd come across a snake out in the fields. I grabbed a knife and ran out, ready to stab the snake if I had to. But Auntie Hata was just standing there, smiling and pointing.

"Look, Rinko, it's been raining spiders."

Sure enough, there were tiny spiders and wispy webs all over the fields and the morning dew was caught in them like tiny crystal beads. It was the prettiest thing.

"Will the spiders eat the cucumbers?" I asked.

"Not likely. They'll probably all be blown off somewhere by the wind and be gone by tomorrow." Auntie Hata bent down for a closer look at the shimmery webs and said, "What a shame."

I knew exactly what she meant. I think it's awful that spiders work so hard spinning beautiful lacy webs—so neat and perfect—only to have them destroyed in a second by the wind or some giant human being.

Auntie Hata picked her cucumbers carefully so she wouldn't destroy any of the webs. And I guess that's when I began to like her, because that's exactly what I would have done. That is also when I smelled something burning.

"It's the rice!" I yelled.

When Auntie Hata and I got back to the house, the kitchen was filled with smoke, and Zenny and Abu were standing there yelling, "Fire! Fire! The stove's on fire!"

"It's only the rice," I hollered, and I flapped a dish towel to get rid of the smoke, while Auntie Hata grabbed the pot from the stove.

By the time we sat down to have our soup and some of the rice we saved from the top of the pot, I'd given up trying to have a private conversation with Auntie Hata. I just blurted out my question in front of Zenny and Abu.

"What's wrong with the old man, anyway?" I asked.

"He's so strange and unfriendly." And I told what he'd said about not mentioning him to Mrs. Sugar or our minister.

Auntie Hata stopped eating and looked at me thoughtfully. Then she said, "He's had some hard times." As though that would explain everything.

"Like what?"

I could tell Auntie Hata was thinking carefully what to say, like Papa when he rubs his mustache.

"It's not always easy to make a life for yourself in a strange land," she said. "Sometimes . . . often, you're afraid, and you close yourself off and shut people out."

I could understand that. I've felt that way myself lots of times even if I'm *not* in a strange land. But I wondered why the old man should be afraid of me or my friends?

"Aw, the old man ain't afraid of nothing," Zenny said.

"He sure ain't," Abu agreed.

But Auntie Hata didn't seem to hear them. "We all get scared sometimes," she said. "And lonely too. Oh, yes. Lonely lots of times."

"Well, you don't have to be lonely while I'm here," I reminded her.

Auntie Hata smiled, crinkling her eyes into two small crescent moons. "That's right, Rinko."

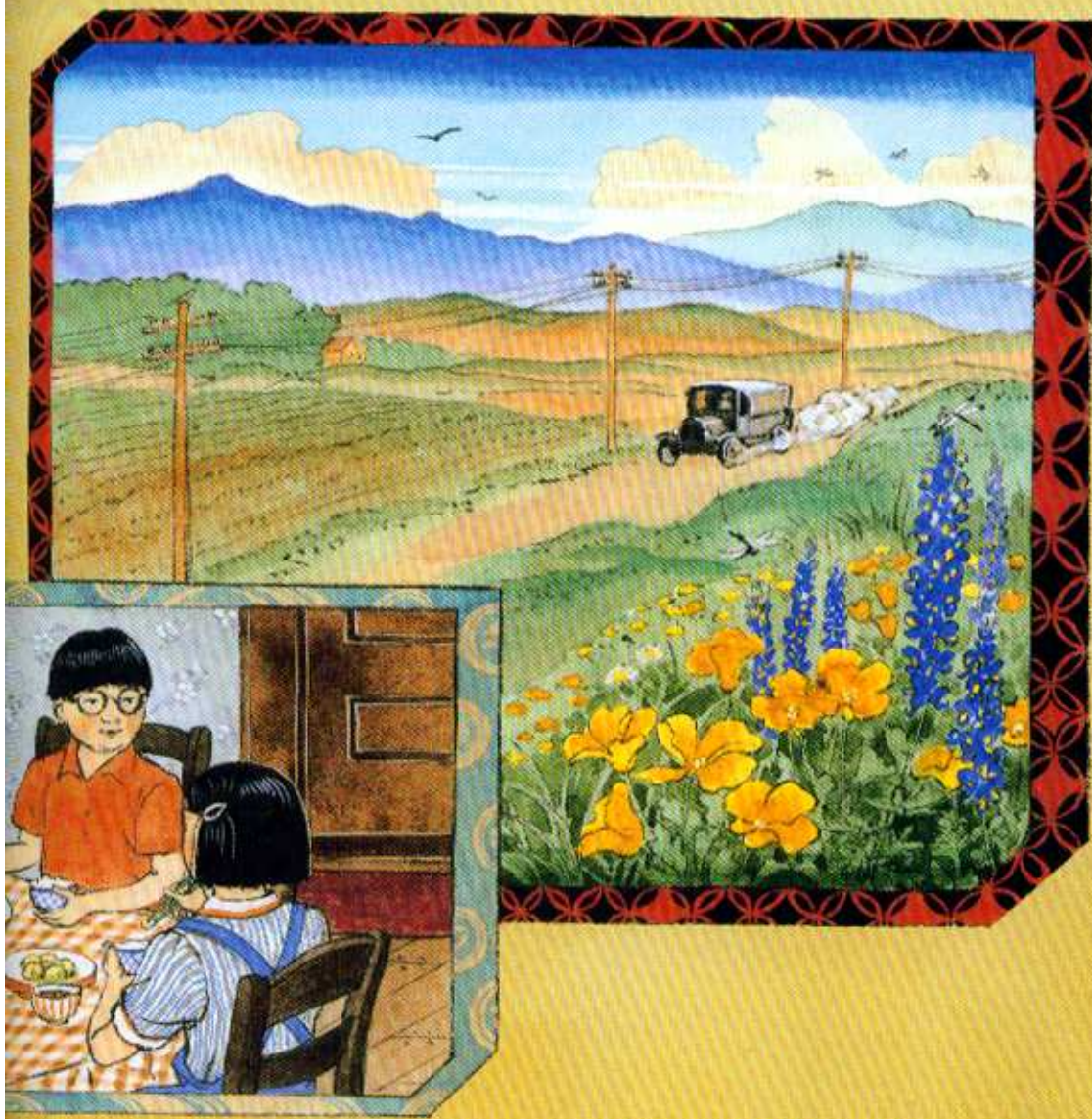
She reached over to pat my shoulder and then got up to clear the table, and I still didn't know a thing about the old man.



The second bad thing happened when I'd almost forgotten about the first one. It was a lot worse than my sprained ankle, and it didn't happen to me.

It happened just as we were going to take more cucumbers to the factory. We had loaded up the truck and were ready to leave when an old beat-up truck came rattling along, and I heard a sound like the honking of a tired goose.

I knew what it was when I saw the canvas flapping over the sides of the truck and a scale dangling in the back. It looked just like the truck of a Japanese peddler who comes to our house once a week on Thursday afternoons.





His truck is filled with crates of carrots and string beans, taro root and long white radish, ginger and burdock root, and gallon tins of bean curd squares floating in water. There are also hundred-pound sacks of white rice and barrels of soy sauce and tubs of yellow pickled radish. Everything in the truck smells awful and wonderful at the same time and makes my mouth water.

A smiling, skinny Japanese man jumped out of this truck and Auntie Hata called to him. "You're exactly the person I wanted to see, Mr. Kogi. I'm all out of bean curd cakes, and I need a sack of rice."

She hurried into the house to get a pan for the bean curd cakes, and that was when I heard the freight train coming.

Zenny and Abu took a quick look at each other and yelled, "We'll be right back."



I knew exactly what they were up to. "You'd better not!" I said. "You'd better come back right now."

But they completely ignored me, and I couldn't go after them because the peddler was talking to me. He twisted the cover off a small jar of pink grease and poked it under my nose.

"Here, smell," he said. "It's hair pomade made by my missus. It comes in three different scents."

I took a sniff and said, "Strawberry," as if I was taking a smelling test.

"That's right," he said. "Want to try some?"

He was smiling and waiting, and I could see the gold fillings in his front teeth. I didn't want to hurt his feelings, but I certainly didn't want to put that pink grease on my hair and go around smelling like strawberries. Auntie Hata came back just in time to rescue me.



"Oh, is that more of your hair pomade?" she asked, and she took a big dab with her finger, bent over, and smeared it all over her shoes.

"It's much better than shoe polish," she said, laughing, "and I have the best smelling shoes in East Oakland."

The peddler laughed too. I guess he didn't really care whether Auntie Hata used his pomade on her head or her feet.

She didn't have enough money to pay for the rice, but the peddler heaved the big sack on his shoulder and carried it into the kitchen for her.

"Pay me next time," he said, and he rattled off in his noisy truck.

Auntie Hata looked around for Zenny and Abu. "Now where did those two rascals go?"

"I know," I said. "I'll go get them." And I left Auntie Hata cranking up the truck's motor.

I ran out the front gate and headed toward the slight rise, just before the freight train started down the slope. The train rolled by as I got there, and just as I thought, Zenny and Abu were hitching a ride. Abu was on the front ladder of one car and Zenny on the back.

"Get off!" I yelled. "We're leaving."

"OK," Zenny hollered back.

"Right now!" I shouted.



So Zenny jumped, landed on his feet and ran hard until he got his balance.

Abu turned to wave at me.

"Get off! Get off!" I yelled.

But he didn't. He was looking back at me instead of where he should jump. And when he finally did jump, he fell to the ground and rolled backwards toward the wheels of the train.

"Watch out!" Zenny hollered.

"Stop!" I screamed at the train. But it kept right on going, and I thought I saw a wheel roll over Abu's arm before he could roll away.

I heard somebody screaming like crazy but didn't know it was me. Abu had rolled away from the tracks, but his right arm was twisted, as if it didn't belong to his body, and there was blood and grease and dirt all over it. His glasses lay smashed on the ground beside him.

I was still screaming when I got to him, and Zenny yelled, "Stop screaming, Rinko."

But I saw Abu all crumpled up on the ground, and I couldn't stop.

"Abu's dead!" I screamed. "Abu's dead! Abu's dead!"

Auntie Hata must've heard me, because all of a sudden she was next to me and Zenny. She cried out when she saw Abu and knelt down beside him.

"Abu Chan, Abu Chan. *Doshita? Doshita?* What happened?" she murmured over and over. She felt his head and touched his cheek and tried to check his pulse.

"I'm sorry, Ma. I'm sorry," Zenny sobbed. Tears were streaming down his face.

I was crying too and still screaming, "Abu's dead!"

He was so still, with no color in his face. His eyes were closed and his arm was twisted and horrible looking.

"Stop screaming, Rinko," Auntie Hata said to me in a firm voice. "Abu is going to be all right, but we've got to get him to a hospital quickly."

She took a handkerchief from her pocket and tied it around Abu's arm to stop the bleeding. Then she picked him up carefully and carried him to the truck. Zenny and I trailed after her, sobbing and crying. She told us to get in the truck first, and then she lifted Abu onto our laps.

I could see she didn't want to let go of him, but she had to drive, so she put Abu's head and shoulders on

my lap and stretched his legs over Zenny's. I was surprised how heavy he was. I could feel my heart pounding all over my body and I felt awful about all the mean things I'd said to Abu. I didn't know if he could hear me, but I talked to him.

"It's OK, Abu. You're going to be OK. You'll see." I felt as though he'd stay alive as long as he could hear me talking to him. So I talked all the way to the hospital. And Zenny kept patting his legs.

I don't know how Auntie Hata got to Highland Hospital so fast. I guess she knew the way because she'd taken Mr. Hata there to see the doctor, even though he hated the place.

As soon as we got there, the doctors rushed Abu into the emergency room, and Auntie Hata and Zenny and I waited in the corridor outside.

I guess I feel about hospitals the way Mr. Hata did—that once you're stuck in one, you're going to come out in a wooden box. I kept wishing we could hurry up and get Abu out of that awful place. Well, after a while the doctor came and told us they were taking Abu to surgery.

We all jumped up from the bench, and I yelled, "Surgery! You mean you're going to cut off his arm?"

"Oh, please, no!" Auntie Hata cried.

But the doctor told us not to worry, that they'd take good care of Abu, and that we should just sit down and wait.

I guess we must've sat there in that crowded hallway for a couple of hours, with nobody paying any

attention to us. I felt as though an egg beater was churning up my stomach and everything else all together. And I guess Auntie Hata felt the same way, because she kept twisting a handkerchief in her hands until it was almost in shreds. Every once in a while she would send Zenny to go ask somebody about Abu.

"What's happening to my brother?" he'd ask anybody in a white uniform.

And whoever he talked to would just say something like, "Everything's OK, sonny. Don't worry. Go sit down till your doctor comes to talk to you."

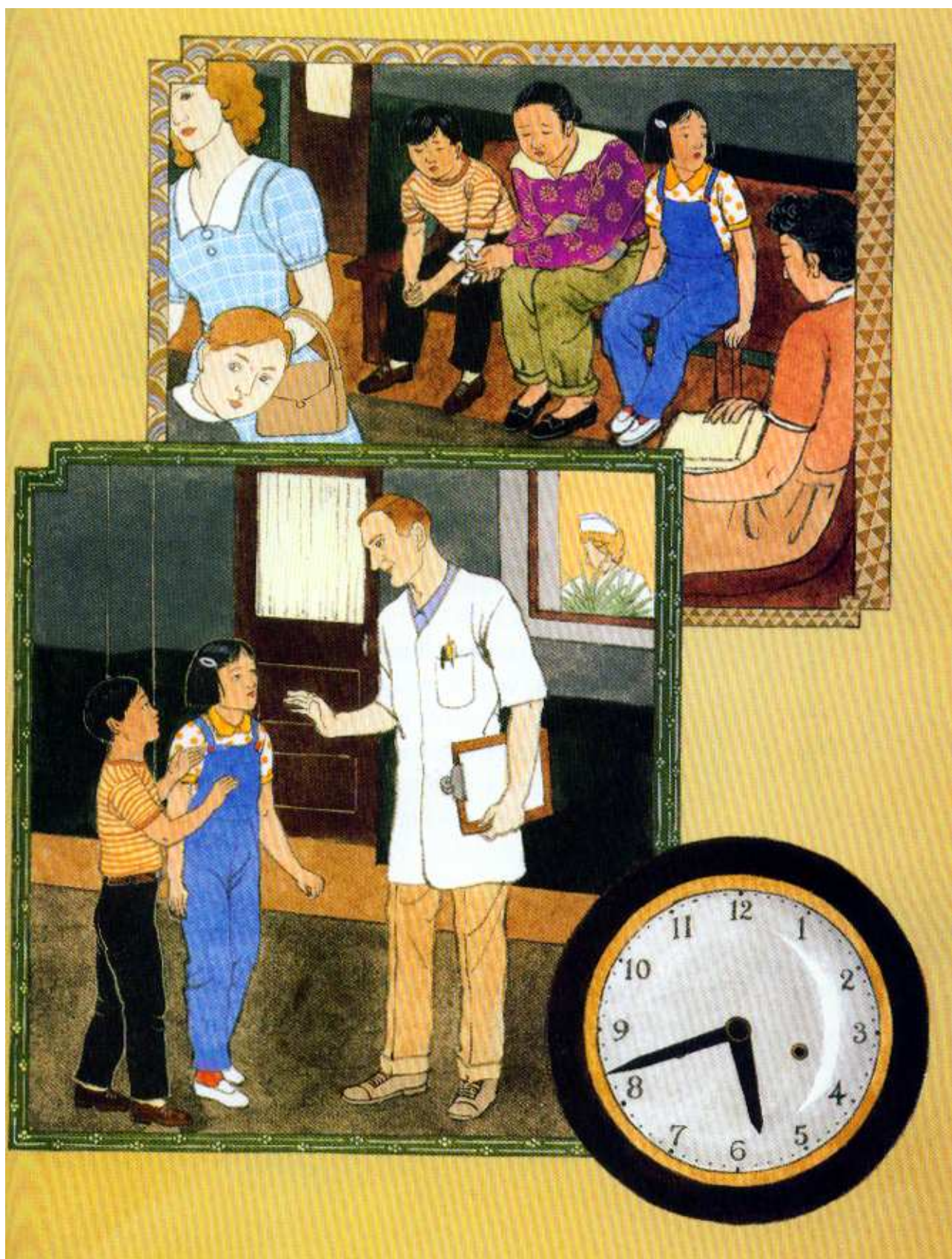
So we sat and waited and waited and waited, and by then I felt all ground up like the sesame seeds in Mama's mortar. When I went to look at a clock, it was almost six o'clock.

Finally a doctor came out and called, "Mrs. Hata?"

Auntie Hata shot up from the bench as if she'd exploded from a cannon. She had a hard time finding the right words to ask the doctor what she wanted to know. "My boy, he's OK? He's OK? Please?"

"Your boy has lost a lot of blood but we gave him a transfusion," the doctor said slowly. "There's been some nerve damage, and he may not regain full use of his right arm. But he's holding his own. You can go see him now in Ward C."

Auntie Hata was trying hard to understand, but she wasn't sure. "Abu's OK?" she asked me over and over. "He's OK?"



I wasn't sure myself. All I could say was, "I think so, Auntie Hata."

We found our way to Ward C, and there was Abu in a big room filled with a lot of sick people. He was in a corner bed and he looked small and helpless with his arm bandaged clear up to his shoulder. He was asleep and couldn't talk to us, but Auntie Hata wouldn't leave him.

"You know the way to the old man's Eagle Cafe?" she asked Zenny.

"I can find it."

"Well, you and Rinko walk there and tell him what happened. Wait until he gets off work. Then take the streetcar home with him."

She took two nickels from her coin purse and gave one to each of us for carfare. She said she wanted to be there when Abu woke up and didn't know when she'd get home.

"Rinko, can you make some supper for the two of you?"

I nodded. We could always have cucumbers with soy sauce and pour hot tea over the rice left over from breakfast. I didn't want to leave Auntie Hata there by herself, but she didn't look scared or frightened anymore. She was calm and strong, the way the old man had been the day he chased off the bully at the railroad tracks.

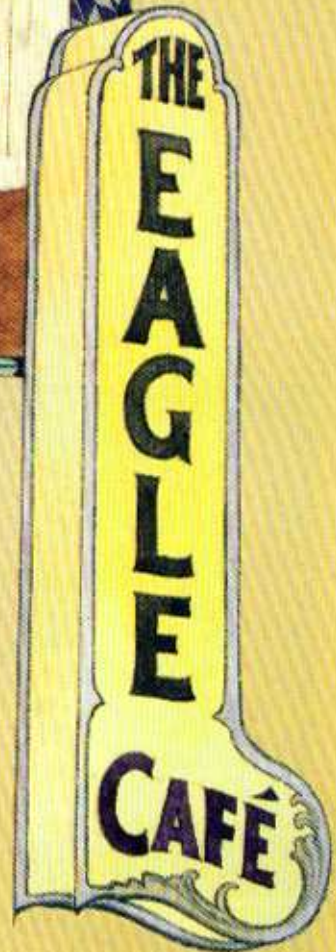


"Go on now," she said, and she nudged us toward the door. There certainly wasn't anything vague about Auntie Hata then. She took charge as though she knew exactly what to do.

I guess Zenny and I must've walked about thirty blocks to The Eagle Cafe. My knees ached and one big toe throbbed, but I was too worried about Abu to think about myself. I felt it was my fault that Abu was lying in the hospital half dead. If only I'd stopped him before he rode that freight, I thought.

I knew Zenny was feeling as bad as I was, because he didn't say one word all the way to Seventh Street. We just plodded along like two strangers, each of us bundled up in our own gloomy thoughts.

When we finally got to The Eagle Cafe, we found the old man frying some potatoes at the grill. He was wearing a white apron and chef's hat, and he was so



surprised to see us, he just froze with the egg turner clutched in his hand.

"Zenny! Rinko! What are you doing here?"

That was when Zenny and I both started talking, and I felt as though I was drowning in all the words that came tumbling out of my mouth. Between the two of us, we told the old man everything that had happened.

"And Abu? How is he now?" the old man asked when we finally stopped.

"The doctor said he had nerve damage," I said. "He's lost a lot of blood. Maybe . . . maybe he's going to die." I began to cry again.

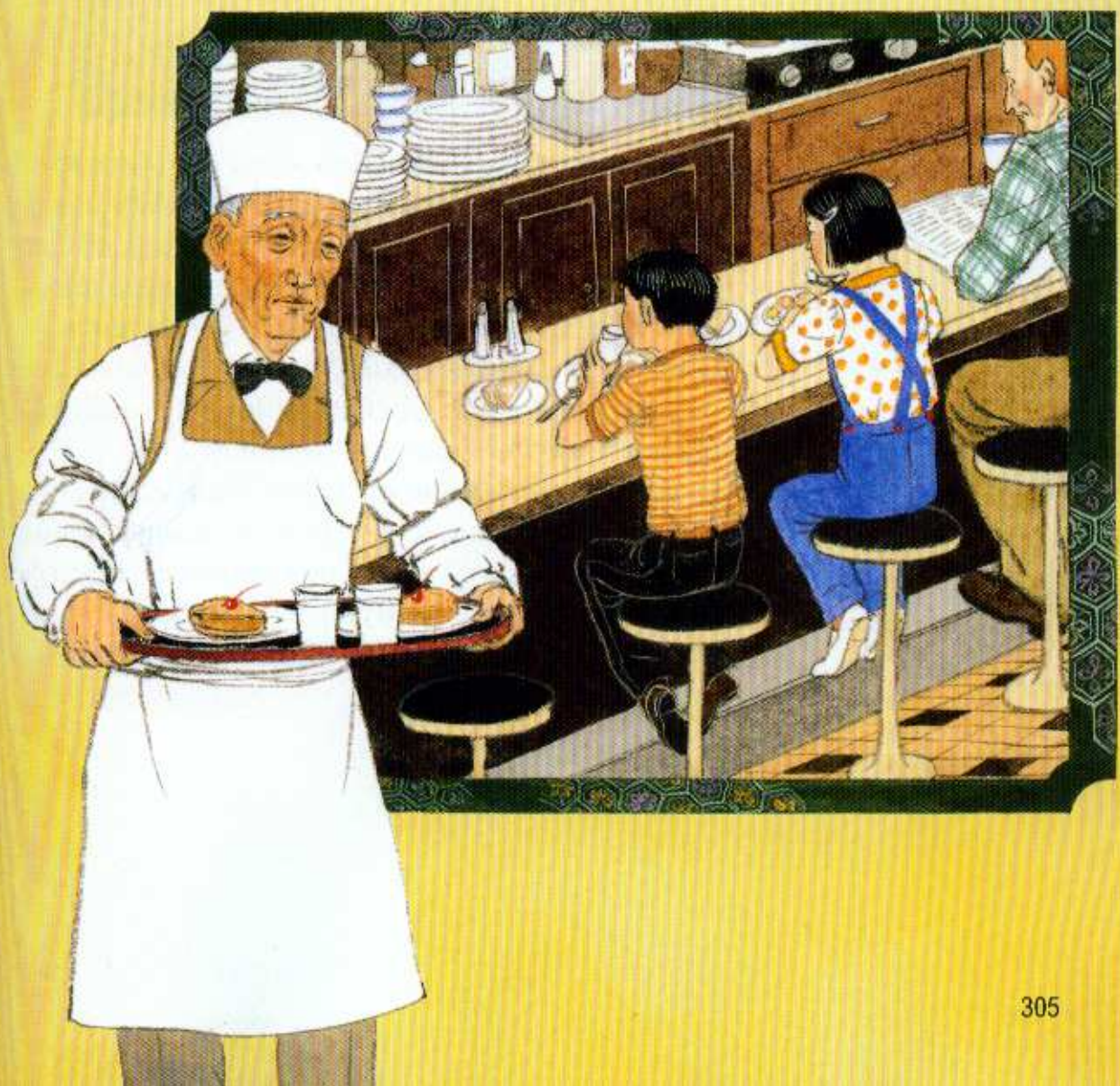
For a minute the old man didn't know what to do with us. Then he went to talk to a bald-headed white man in a rumpled gray sweater who was sitting at the cash register. He called him Mr. Sabatini, and I guess he was the owner of the cafe. When the old man came back, he told us to sit down at the counter and he'd make us something to eat.

"I get off soon," he said, "and by the time you finish eating, I'll be ready to go home with you."

Then the old man was making toast, breaking eggs on the grill, and frying two ham steaks and some potatoes. It was like the time I'd seen him painting the samurai on his kite. His hands were steady and sure and knew exactly what to do without the old man's even having to think about it. I never saw anybody cook so fast. And suddenly everything was there in front of me, hot and sizzling, on a thick white plate, and it smelled so wonderful I nearly fainted.

Zenny and I pitched in and ate as though we hadn't seen any food for three weeks. It was strange eating breakfast for supper, but I'd been eating lunch for breakfast every day at Auntie Hata's, and it didn't seem to make any difference to my stomach. I sopped up all the runny egg yolk with my toast and ate every bit of the ham and potatoes.

The old man kept an eye on us while he served some other customers, and for dessert he gave each of us a piece of apple pie. He also poured a little coffee into our milk, and I had two glasses.



When it was time to go, the old man tried to pay Mr. Sabatini, but he wouldn't take his money.

"Forget it, Manki," he said. "It's on the house." I thought he'd called him monkey.

"He called you Manki," Zenny said as soon as we were outside. "That ain't your name, is it?"

The old man shook his head. "Maybe someday he will take the trouble to call me by my proper name, Mankichi," he said, and he strode so fast toward the corner to catch the streetcar, Zenny and I had to run to keep up.

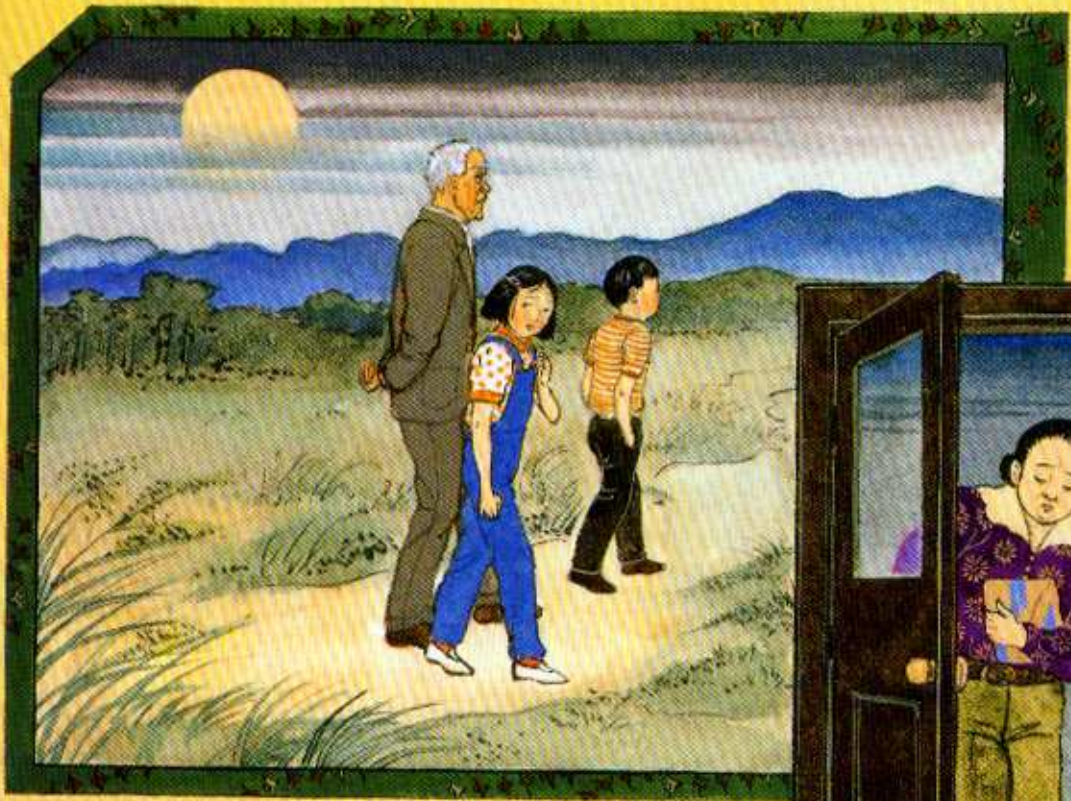
The streetcar rattled and poked along until it finally reached the end of the line, and then we still had about a mile to walk to get home.

It was really spooky walking along that dark road with only the empty fields stretching out around us. I was dying to hold a friendly hand, but nobody offered me one, so I hugged myself real hard instead. I also kept watching for spirits in case there were any hovering around in the weeds.

I guess Zenny knew what I was doing because he said, "They ain't there tonight."

In a way that made me feel worse, because then I wondered if maybe the spirits were at the hospital waiting to take Abu to the spirit world. I thought maybe Abu's papa was there that minute, trying to take Abu with him.

"No!" I yelled into the dark fields. "You can't take him."



Zenny gave me a funny look, but I guess he was used to having his mama pop out with strange remarks. The old man turned to look at me too, but he didn't say anything either.

The old man came home with us, and we all sat in the kitchen waiting for Auntie Hata. The old man asked Zenny about his kite, and I was beginning to feel left out again when Auntie Hata finally came home. I took one look at her face and knew something terrible had happened.

"What is it, Mrs. Hata?" the old man asked. "Is it Abu?"

"No, no, Abu is all right. He's asleep and the doctor made me leave. But it's gone!"

"What is, Ma?"

"The truck. Our truck's gone!"

"The truck? The truck's gone?" I asked like an echo.

The old man made Auntie Hata sit down and told her to calm herself. "Are you sure you just didn't forget where you parked it?"

"No, no. I left it right by the entrance."

"That's right," I said remembering. We'd pulled up at the emergency entrance and piled out without giving the truck another thought.

"And you left the keys in it?" Zenny asked.

Auntie Hata nodded sadly. "The keys, the cucumbers, the truck . . . somebody's taken them all."

"Maybe somebody parked it for you," I said hopefully.

"I walked around that hospital three times looking for it," Auntie Hata said, shaking her head. "It's gone. Somebody's stolen our truck!"

There it was, I thought, feeling terrible. That was the third bad thing to happen. My ankle, Abu's accident, and now the truck. Things seemed to be going from bad to worse ever since I arrived, and I began to feel like a jinx on Auntie Hata's life.

"I'll call Papa. He'll think of something," I started to get up and then remembered there was no phone in the house and that I'd have to wait until the next day to call from the hospital.

"I'll speak to the cop who comes to The Eagle for coffee every morning," the old man said. "Maybe he can help you find your truck."



But nothing we said could cheer her up. "I can't earn a living without the truck," Auntie Hata said miserably.

She let out a low moan, as though all the energy was drifting out of her body, like air going out of a balloon.

"We're finished, old man," she said slowly. "I think we're finished."

As soon as I called Mama and Papa the next day, they rushed over to the hospital. And they brought Reverend Mitaka with them. He is a bachelor, who Tami's mother is dying to find a wife for, and he is so shy, he never looks up from his notes when he preaches. He also has bad eyes and wears such thick glasses he looks a little like an owl.

I wished Mama hadn't brought him, but I guess she thought he could comfort Auntie Hata. Or maybe she thought Abu would get better if he prayed over him. I was sincerely hoping he wouldn't, but Reverend Mitaka prayed all right. He put his hand on Abu's forehead, and we stood around his bed as if we were having a prayer meeting.

I was so embarrassed because everybody in the ward was staring at us. I kept my eyes open all the time, watching to see if Abu would open his, but he didn't. Zenny had his eyes open too and was making circles on the floor with his left toe.

When I was feeling like I wanted to sink right into the floor, Reverend Mitaka finally stopped, and Auntie Hata took him and Mama and Papa aside to tell them about Abu's arm.

Zenny and I tried to get Abu to open his eyes.

"Hey, Abu, it's me," Zenny said, bending close to his ear. "You OK?"

Abu's eyelids flickered and he managed a small smile.

"Yeah," he said in a thin voice. He sounded as though he was inside a tunnel. "Next time I'll jump better."

"Next time nothing," I said, sounding like his mother. "You'd better stick to flying kites."

The minute I said that I could have choked myself for being so stupid. How was Abu going to fly a kite if he couldn't use his right hand?

"Listen, Abu," I said, changing the subject as fast as I could. "You don't have to pay me that million billion dollars you still owe me. OK?"

That made Abu grin a little bit. "OK. Shake," he said, and he stuck the fingers of his left hand out from under the covers. They felt hot and weak, and Abu couldn't even give my hand a squeeze.

I couldn't stand seeing him look so pathetic.

"Listen, I'll bring your turtle, Herbert, to see you next time. OK?" I said, and I left in a hurry to go see what Mama and Papa were talking about. They were discussing Auntie Hata's truck.

"Let me look around," Papa said. "Maybe I can find another old truck and fix it up for you."

But Auntie Hata just shook her head. "What's the use?" she said. "Summer's almost over and the cucumbers will soon be gone. Then what will I do? I can't do



gardening the way Mr. Hata used to. No, I don't need another truck. All I want is for Abu to get well."

"He will, Mrs. Hata," Mama said. "He will."

When it was time to leave, Mama took me aside. "Well, Rinko," she said. "Your two weeks are about up. Do you want to come home with us or will you stay until the end of the month?"

I was surprised she should even ask, but I guess she did it to make me realize what I'd already decided. I hadn't even thought about going home early.

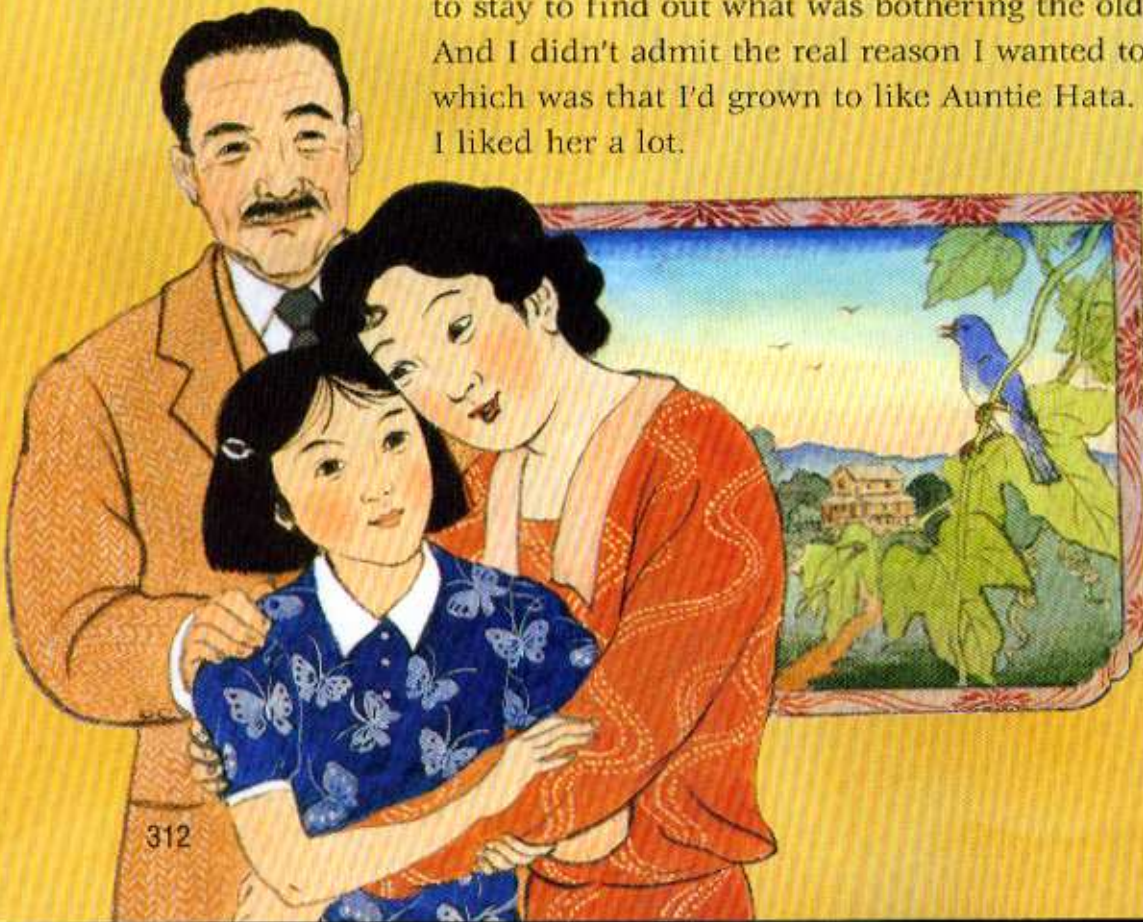
"I can't leave," I said to Mama. "Auntie Hata *really* needs me now."

Mama put her arm around me and gave me a hard squeeze. "Good," she said. "I hoped you'd say that."

Papa checked with me too. "You're sure you're all right?" he asked. "You're sure you want to stay?"

"Sure, Papa," I said. "I've got some unfinished business in East Oakland."

Papa looked puzzled, but I couldn't tell him I had to stay to find out what was bothering the old man. And I didn't admit the real reason I wanted to stay, which was that I'd grown to like Auntie Hata. In fact, I liked her a lot.



MEET

YOSHIKO UCHIDA

Yoshiko Uchida wrote her first stories when she was only ten years old, using brown wrapping paper that she made into booklets. She also kept a journal. Because she grew up during the Great Depression of the 1930s, she learned to save things, like her books and journals. It's lucky that she did, because the memories she recorded helped her create the award-winning books she has written as an adult.

All of Uchida's books are about Japanese or Japanese-American characters. *The Best Bad Thing* is the second book in her trilogy about Rinko, a girl growing up in the hard times of the 1930s. Although these books don't describe Uchida's own life exactly, she says that a lot of herself is in Rinko.

Some of Uchida's memories of growing up are more pleasant than others. She spent the first twenty years of her life in pleasant neighborhoods in northern California. But in 1941, the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, and her life changed dramatically. Panicked about the possibility of more attacks and spies, the American government rounded up Japanese Americans who lived on the West Coast. Uchida wrote about her family's experiences in *Journey to Topaz* and later in the award-winning *Journey Home*, which continues the family's story after World War II.

Today, when Uchida talks to students about the camps, she always asks why they think she wrote about these experiences. "You wrote about them so it won't happen again," they say." But she also feels that her books have a larger message. "I hope my readers can be caring human beings who don't think in terms of labels—foreigners or Asians or whatever—but think of people as human beings. If that comes across, then I've accomplished my purpose."

